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ABSTRACT

One explanation for the lack of contraception use among adolescents is that young women may feel embarrassment or rejection by their partners if they initiate the use of contraception. To explore young adults' reactions to contraceptive use, 160 college students evaluated a description of an unmarried young couple which varied the length of time they had dated each other before having sex, gender of person initiating contraception, and whether the use of contraceptives was planned or unplanned. Students were asked to make a number of evaluations from the perspective of the man and woman in the story. Results showed that female evaluators, more than male evaluators, tended to assume that a sexually active woman's partner would have less positive regard for her. Females also typically thought that the man would think less of his partner than a woman would of hers. Male evaluators made no such distinction, but assumed that the man and woman would have equally high regard for one another. Whether or not the woman initiated or planned contraceptive use had little effect upon evaluators' assumptions about her partner's regard for her. The findings suggest that women may be overly pessimistic about males' responses to contraceptively assertive females. (JAC)

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TAKING THE INITIATIVE: A GREEN LIGHT FOR CONTRACEPTIVE RESPONSIBILITY?

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TAKING THE INITIATIVE: A GREEN LIGHT FOR CONTRACEPTIVE RESPONSIBILITY?

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Statement of the Problem

A large majority of adolescents report engaging in premarital intercourse, but only about 30% consistently use contraception. It is not too surprising then, that over a million teenaged American women become pregnant annually (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1981; Kantner & Zelnik, 1977).

One explanation for the lack of contraceptive use is that young women may fear embarrassment or rejection by their partners if they push the use of contraception (Fox, 1977; Goldsmith, Gabrielson, Matthews, & Potts, 1972). Fox has argued that the "nice girl" role into which young women are socialized may conflict with the active behavior needed if a young woman is to use contraceptives conscientiously. Presumably, concern with a partner's evaluation if she takes an active contraceptive role would be greater early in a relationship than later when a woman knows her partner better. That is, women may avoid taking contraceptive responsibility early in a relationship partially because they believe that their partner will make negative assumptions about them if they do. Indeed, it has been noted that failure to use contraception is more pronounced among less involved couples than among those who are more strongly committed to each other (Maxwell, Sack, Frary, & Keller, 1977; Reiss, Banwart, & Foreman, 1975).

To explore young adults' reactions to contraceptive use,

college students were given a description of an unmarried, young couple who varied in the length of time they had been dating before having sex with each other, the gender of the person initiating contraceptive use, and whether the use of contraceptives was planned or unplanned. Students were asked to make a number of evaluations from the perspective of the man and of the woman in the story (Greg and Linda), indicating their perceptions of how much they thought Greg and Linda liked each other, how committed each was to their relationship, and other indications of their regard for one another.

The effects of five variables on participants' evaluations were examined. These variables were:

1) length of the couple's relationship (two weeks vs. three months);
2) gender of the initiator of contraceptive use (male initiation of condom use versus female initiation of the use of foam);
3) whether or not the use of contraception was planned (the initiator had contraception with him/her or had to go get some);
4) gender of participant;
5) ratings of the man versus the woman in the stories (a repeated measure, with each participant making separate ratings of a) the stimulus man, after assuming his female partner's perspective, and b) the stimulus woman, after assuming the perspective of her male partner.

In the portion of this study reported here, three hypotheses

were tested. First, it was expected that participants would assume that the couple had less regard for each other when they first had sex after dating only two weeks versus three months. This overall effect was expected to interact with the stimulus person's gender, such that when dating only two weeks, participants would expect the woman to be evaluated more negatively by her partner than the man would by his partner.

Second, a woman who initiated and/or planned contraception early in the relationship was expected to be rated less positively than a man who did so, or than a woman who took contraceptive responsibility later in the relationship.

Third, it was hypothesized that female (versus male) participants would assume that the stimulus woman would be less positively regarded by her partner than would the stimulus man by his partner.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred sixty college students (80 males and 80 females) at a mid-sized, midwestern university volunteered to participate in a study in which they were told that they would be asked for their reactions to a romantically involved college-aged couple. Most of these students were enrolled in introductory psychology classes and received experimental credit for their participation. Additional volunteers were enrolled in lower division psychology courses. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 27. They were primarily white (96%), single (98%), and Protestant (44%) or Catholic (39%).

Materials

Independent Variables. There were eight, one-page versions of a story about a college-aged man and woman (Greg and Linda) on a date, who decided to engage in intercourse for the first time with each other. Variations in these eight versions reflected the differing levels of the experimental conditions, i.e., the length of the couple's relationship, the gender of the contraceptive behavior initiator, and whether there was planned or unplanned use of contraception. An example of one of the vignettes follows:

> (Short relationship, male initiates discussion of contraception, and contraceptive use is planned.)
>
> Greg and Linda are both 20 years old, and live in Keller Hall, a coed dorm on the campus where they go to college. They met about two weeks ago, and have gone out together three times since then. Last Saturday night, they went to a movie and had a really nice evening together. Afterwards, they talked about going to the bar, but figured it would be too noisy and crowded. So, they decided to go back to his dorm room to talk and listen to music.
>
> As they arrived at the dorm, his roommate was just leaving. Finding themselves alone in his room, and sitting with their arms around each other, they began to kiss as they talked. They became more and more excited and after awhile, they both realized that they were probably going to make love for the first time together.
>
> Just before they were going to make love, Greg said to Linda, "Shouldn't we use something?"
>
> "Yeah, that's a good idea," Linda replied. "I'm not sure if it's a safe time of the month for me."
>
> Greg had anticipated that he and Linda might soon be having intercourse. So, he had put a condom in his wallet.
>
> "I've got a rubber. Just a minute and I'll go get it," said Greg.
>
> Greg returned to the bed, smiled at Linda and said, "We're all set," and they embraced.

Dependent Measures. Participants responded to seven questions pertaining to Greg and Linda's regard for one

another in which they indicated their responses on seven-point scales. (A rating of 1 indicated very little of a quality, a 4 indicated a moderate amount, and a 7 indicated a great deal of a quality.) These questions included how much they thought each cared for the other, how long they thought each wanted to date the other, how likely they thought it was that each might want to marry the other eventually, how much respect they thought each had for the other, how likely it was that each was currently dating others, how many previous sexual partners each thought the other had had, and how much self respect they thought each had.

Each participant responded to a set of dependent measures pertaining to Greg and another set for Linda. The order of the sets on Greg and Linda was counterbalanced.

A demographic questionnaire was also given. Participants provided information on their age, gender, marital status, religion, race, and sexual and contraceptive histories.

Procedure

To reduce volunteer bias made possible by describing this research as a study of sexual and contraceptive behavior, this study was described as an investigation of reactions to a romantically involved, college-aged couple.

Each participant responded to the experimental materials in a private room. Instructions directed the participant to read a one-page story about a college-aged couple on a date, and then to complete two short series of questions on how they thought the characters in the story felt about each other.

For example, they were asked to "try to look at Linda from Greg's point of view, and most closely estimate how he feels about her". Males and females were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions represented through different versions of the story, with each participant reading only one story. There were equal numbers of male and female participants in each condition (10 males and 10 females).

RESULTS

Responses were analyzed using a 2 (length of relationship) x 2 (gender of participant) x 2 (gender of contraceptive initiator) x 2 (planned or unplanned use of contraception) x 2 (gender of the stimulus person being rated) factorial multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with repeated measures on the last factor. As may be seen in Table 1, the overall MANOVA on evaluative responses to the stimulus persons yielded main effects on length of relationship and stimulus person gender, in addition to six interactions.

The first hypothesis that evaluations would be influenced by length of relationship was supported, such that the couple was assumed to evaluate each other more positively in the longer versus the shorter relationship on five of the seven questions (estimates of caring ($\bar{X}$=4.90 vs. 4.41), respect ($\bar{X}$=4.74 vs. 3.99), future dating ($\bar{X}$=4.67 vs. 3.48), likelihood of marriage ($\bar{X}$=3.81 vs. 3.17), and a lesser likelihood of currently dating others ($\bar{X}$=3.02 vs. 3.53)). Length of relationship also interacted significantly with initiator gender, participant gender, and contraceptive planning; however, once the evaluations

of the man versus the woman were considered separately, length of relationship no longer interacted with any other factors. The difference in evaluations of the man versus the woman was highly significant ($p<.0001$); respondents assumed that the woman compared to the man cared more ($\bar{X}$=4.89 vs. 4.42) and hac greater respect for her partner ($\bar{X}$=4.60 vs. 4.12), would date him longer ($\bar{X}$=4.38 vs. 3.76), and be more likely to marry him eventually ($\bar{X}$=3.76 vs. 3.21).

Upon examining significant higher order interactions between evaluations of the stimulus persons, initiator gender, contraceptive planning, and participant gender, several interesting findings emerged. Planned comparisons within these interactions revealed more differentiation by female than be male participants. For example, females generally thought the man would evaluate his partner less positively than the woman would hers, and that the woman would have less self respect than would the man ($\bar{X}$=4.02 vs. 5.01). Notable in their absence were any differences made by males in their estimates of the partners' views of each other; males thought the man and woman had equally high regard for each other. Further, the man's respect for his partner was perceived as greater by male than by female participants ($\bar{X}$=4.46 vs. 3.79), suggesting that females tend to overestimate how critical they think a man's reaction to his sexual partner will be.

The influence of the gender of the initiator of contraception on evaluations of the man versus the woman was not as pervasive, yielding significant results on only two of the seven questions.

Specifically, when the man initiated contraception, respondents thought that his partner would be more likely to want to marry him than he would want to marry her ($\bar{X}$=3.85 vs. 3.38, $p<.05$). He was also perceived as having more sexual experience when he initiated contraception than when she did so ($\bar{X}$=3.65 vs. 2.95, $p<.001$). None of the evaluations of the woman differed as a function of whether or not she initiated contraceptive use.

The interaction between planned or unplanned use of contraception, gender of participant, and stimulus person gender yielded few significant differences. Only the man's number of past sexual partners was perceived to be greater by female participants, regardless of whether or not contraceptive use was planned or unplanned.

Conclusions

These results suggest that females anticipate a sexually active woman to be less positively regarded by her partner than may be justified. Females tended to assume that a woman's partner would have less positive regard for her than did males who imagined themselves in her partner's place. Females also typically thought that the man would think less of his partner than a woman would of hers. Males made no such distinction; rather, they assumed that the man and woman would have equally high regard for one another. Whether or not the woman initiated or planned contraceptive use had little effect upon participants' assumptions about her partner's regard for her. Hence, women may be overly pessimistic about males' responses to contraceptively assertive females. Finally, although a couple involved in a

longer relationship was perceived as thinking more highly of each other than when dating for a brief period, this effect disappeared when either the man's or woman's ratings were considered separately. Less positive assumptions of a man's regard for his partner than a woman for hers, overwhelmingly made by female participants, appeared to override any effect that length of relationship contributed in such evaluations.

Any of these points would seem to be of high interest to college students enrolled in a human sexuality course, consulting a family planning clinic, or just talking with their friends or hall advisors. If college women believe that men will not think less of them for engaging in sex and taking the initiative for contraceptive use, especially in a longer relationship, they may be much more inclined to anticipate the need for birth control before it is too late, or at least to insist on obtaining some before intercourse begins.

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TABLE 1

SIGNIFICANT MAIN EFFECTS AND INTERACTIONS FROM THE OVERALL MANOVA

Effect	df	F=	p<
Length	(7, 138)	6.22	.0001
Initiator Gender x Length	(7, 138)	2.44	.0219
Initiator Gender x Length x Planning	(7, 138)	2.04	.0533
Initiator Gender x Length x Planning x Subject Gender	(7, 138)	2.26	.0331
Stimulus Person Gender	(7, 138)	11.84	.0001
Stimulus Person Gender x Initiator Gender	(7, 138)	4.56	.0002
Stimulus Person Gender x Subject Gender	(7, 138)	4.31	.0003
Stimulus Person Gender x Subject Gender x Planning	(7, 138)	2.43	.0224

Length = Length of relationship (2 weeks vs. 3 months)

Initiator Gender = Male vs. Female initiation of contraceptive use

Planning = Planned vs. unplanned use of contraceptives

Subject Gender = Male vs. female participants

Stimulus Person Gender = Ratings of either the male or female stimulus person